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*The Anatomy of Birds*

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Translated from the Norwegian

by Rosie Hedger

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*Fuglenes anatomi*

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In Belgium, in the region known as Flanders, gatherings of people line the roadsides, a small cage in front of each of them, a finch inside each of the cages, and the participants sit by their own cages and listen, as if to the radio or a recording, a special piece of music, and if their finch should call or sing a tune, the bird’s owner receives a chalk mark on a wooden stick, the person with the most chalk marks wins, I told my daughters all about it as we drove through Belgium in the autumn that we moved here. We were on our way to Calais to take the ferry over the English Channel, I told them about how the participants lined up by the road, the birds waiting inside their boxes, we took a detour that day, drove a different route on our way to the French coast in order to seek out the *de vinkeniers*, and as we approached Bruges I thought I spotted a few of them, a group of men with boxes at the edge of the road, but the girls had fallen asleep, we didn't want to wake them as we drove past, really it was the wrong time of year for it, what I witnessed was a sad little troupe, it didn't feel like an elegant or important custom, trapping defenceless birds inside boxes, tucking them away in that cramped little space, they used to blind the birds back in the day to condition them into singing more beautifully, or at least that’s how they thought things worked at the time, that the birds would sing more beautifully because there was some sense of loss there, or because they had no idea where they were. We drove on, later we took the ferry over the channel, and then we arrived here. That autumn. That was a long time ago now. Back when I believed that we had left everything behind us, when I believed that we were starting afresh. We were asked to empty the boot of our car at the port in Calais, I don't know what they were looking for, what they thought we’d brought with us, but they were quick about it. Those few belongings we had with us were set down on the tarmac in the rain: a few boxes, rucksacks, books, we’d driven through the night, I thought about the fact that we never needed to return, we’d brought almost nothing with us, yet we had left nothing behind.

Some days, I don’t answer the door to people. I can see them standing outside waiting to be let in, that’s what you do outside a door after all, and then their disappointment, no matter how slight, at having to leave once again. I get it, I do. I know that disappointment, but there’s nothing I can do about it, they turn around, go back to their cars, drive down to the village, the assortment of things left incomplete piles up outside, a brick-like weight just over the threshold. People I haven’t met, greetings and conversations, spun in the air like invisible webs. Often it’s things we’ve ordered, packages are placed on the steps and remain there until I bring them inside, a few have been left by the garden path and forgotten about, torn open by the wind and rain, turned inside out, the contents blown onto the grass, I find the damp remains of a book, drawing things, a tin of biscuits.

If it’s significant in any way, I didn’t open the door to the boy either, not the first time he called round. The boy didn’t come to build the aviary, he came to do some odd jobs for us. He was supposed to paint walls, repair the shed roof, help us with clearing a few waterways, an underground drainage pipe, but I was thinking about the aviary, I explained that it was an enclosure for birds. He didn’t ask me why anyone would need an enclosure for birds. I was alone and taken by surprise by the sound of the doorbell, I could have pretended not to have been at home, I could have, but then he started to knock when nobody responded to the ringing of the bell, and the dogs barked and howled. They don’t like people they don’t know, either. I peered through the glass in the door, in the middle you get the impression of a beam splitting the door in two, the glass on each side is dull and cloudy, like ice early in the year, I tend to simply wait until any visitors give up, it never takes long, but he seemed to know that I was there, hiding. To open the door. To lock eyes with the person waiting. It was raining behind the boy, he had his hood pulled up, it slid back and he must have felt the water from the brim run down into his eyes. I was reluctant to let him inside, to ask if he’d like to come in, I’m sure he found it strange, standing there like that. Outside.

That evening I noticed that one of the channels’ newsreaders had the same nose as the boy, slightly crooked or bent, and I thought about how beautiful that shape of nose was, and why I’d never heard anyone say so. Either way, I could see it, and in the days that followed I noticed other features on the faces of people on television, actors, politicians, features that reminded me of him. But when he returned, I realised that wasn’t what he looked like, not at all, what I’d pictured for myself hadn't been accurate in the slightest. He had a much more interesting face than I’d remembered. The kind of face that makes you think: what will he destroy.

I think he was written before I began writing about him.

The dogs don't bark. The boy is painting the room we call the library. I see him as I pass by, he’s fully-focused on the task at hand. When he turns around and looks at you, there’s another door there, he’s standing there, I think to myself, he’s just behind it, I can see it in his face. He’s 20, young. *The apprentice*, we call him, I don't know if he’s an apprentice, but he could be, I watch what he does, he probably thinks I’m concerned about the walls and the paintwork, thinking about all of that, but I'm not thinking about any of it, it’s not that I’m all that old myself, but the fact that he’s so young, young in a way that is enough to take anyone’s breath away, to make them keenly aware of their own weight, their mass, you stand there staring. I was never very good at being young, it’s why I like growing older, there was always an engine running within me, something uncontrollable, I didn’t believe that I needed a house, a bed, didn’t believe I needed anything permanent, I used people then tossed them aside, the same was true of things I ought to have cared for, perhaps I destroyed someone, I think I did. I was married once too, long before I met Sirke, before our love, I married to restrain myself, to round off everything with a full stop, to end the sentence, but no, a colon, it was more like a colon that offered room for explanation, some sense of meaning, I don’t know what I was thinking, but there was to be no more chaos. A comma. That marriage took the form of a comma, I knew it was a comma, a semi-colon at best, I just pretended that it was something more, that more dominant punctuation could keep me from all that madness, but that wasn’t any good either, everything was my fault, failing to realise that it was a comma, failing to admit that a comma was all it could ever be.

A few times an hour, the apprentice opens the window, leans out, takes a few drags of a cigarette, stubs it out on the brick wall, pinches the embers, throws them away and pops the fag end back inside his pocket. I see it as I pass by, everything about the boy, think to myself that if he should turn around, I’ll say: lovely, you’re doing a wonderful job. But he doesn’t turn around. He carries on with what he’s doing, as if he’s thinking about nothing at all, as if he hasn’t a care. I’ve always been drawn to people who don’t appear to be thinking about anything, those without a worry, not thinking about all of the things they’re supposed to be thinking about. At around five o’clock, roughly the same time that the lad from one of the neighbouring farms drags his yelping münsterländer along the road outside, he packs up his things and goes out to his car, an old rust bucket with number plates, then proceeds to drive away from the house and along the road in the direction of the village or wherever it is that he goes. We remain. At six o’clock, or perhaps a little later, we eat dinner at the table in the drawing room. We lay a tablecloth, set out plates, lay the cutlery neatly alongside them, we sit down, we spread butter on bread, we eat. Soup, or vegetables, rice. Sometimes we roast something time-consuming, on occasions when there’s something to celebrate. We eat in silence, stillness. Sirke and I. Here is the dish with the potatoes in it, the glasses that skim the rims of our plates, the cutlery we place upside down when we’ve had sufficient, resting atop a bit of bread, a piece of carrot. We bring soft paper napkins to our lips.

In the beginning, we liked to gather horse chestnuts in the autumn, we couldn’t walk past them without picking up a few, the chestnuts sealed inside their prickly, yellow-green coats, or perhaps already unclothed and gleaming where they lay, dark-brown, glossy, naked. There were chestnuts strewn everywhere. When we were still new to the area we liked to walk, everything opened itself up to us, we created maps inside ourselves, the fields, the village down the way, the hedges, the farm, the landscape embedded itself within us, in our language, in our thoughts, we dreamed differently. Sometimes we simply like to walk, to walk until we’re no longer thinking about any of it, about the dark roads within us, we act as if everything is fine. We walk to Butcher’s Wood on the outskirts of the village, why do they call it Butcher’s Wood, we don’t know. We walk through the forest, which isn’t a proper forest, between the trunks with the sky above us shut out by dense foliage, oaks, hazels, a few ancient trees, their bark embellished with ivy, diligent, silent.

He drinks. He just started one day. There’s nothing difficult about it, it’s simple. A beer to start with, then another, a bottle of wine, spirits and more alcohol, not too much, but enough, as if he had decided that he was going to be someone who drank from this point onwards, he’d sit up at night, say things, tell me things, he wanted me to stay up too, sometimes I do, up at night, slowly, painstakingly untangling the knots, possibly unravelling everything else that binds us too, I always feel then that it’s raining, everything feels wet, a sinking sensation, disappearing in the water. We do the usual during the day, I write, see to the birds, he works in his little office in the newer part of the house, collects the post at the front door, we take our walks, sit together, each of us reading in our own chair in the evening, not talking, or talking about other things, knotting one thread, then the next, binding things together once again. What am I doing. Nothing. I don’t drink, I don’t sink, I take walks, I get up each morning and open the curtains.

I’ve written my notes about the aviary in the notebook I use for recalling details of stories, texts I’m working on, it’s an ordinary notebook, bound at the spine, the pages are unlined, they’re blank, nothing to interrupt my stream of thought, I’ve drawn a sketch too, a plan detailing the dimensions, the most important thing is sticking to the plan, good-quality materials, focusing on width rather than simply on height, a narrow aviary could only ever be a decorative object. I’ve underlined the word ‘decorative’ twice, I’ve written about the boy in the same notebook, the contents of it are a mess anyway, I write something down, end up not using it, it’s normal, an awful lot reveals itself to be insignificant once you’ve thought it over.

Sirke doesn’t like birds, what are you doing with all these birds, he asks me, we can’t keep this many birds. He doesn’t like the fact that the cages take up space. There are people out there who collect birds, animals, he says, the same way other people collect objects, but they’re not objects, I tell him, they’re a small flock of birds, we have a lot here that takes up more space than they do, I tell him, like what, he asks. He wants me to show him, he says, what exactly occupies more space than the birds do.

My first birds came from the greengrocer’s son, I was walking past the shop in the village, he was standing by the back door, he looked at me, do you want to see them, he said, who, I asked, he pointed to the shed, his mother nodded at me through the shop window, she’s always looking out for him, Elliot, they only have the one son, a boy seemingly devoid of age, initially I’d thought him a brother they had living with them, he appears to be a man but really he’s a boy, we’d seen him mumbling to himself before but we’d never heard him speak, we often saw him tending to the birds when we walked past the open door, leaning close to the mesh outside the aviary, a large, hand-built enclosure crafted from planks of wood, pallets and wire mesh. The greengrocer is from Bristol, his wife is a foreigner like me, though I don’t know where she’s from. I crossed the old paving stones with Elliot, past a stack of wooden boxes, Elliot waved me down the narrow passageway, into the half-darkness. At the point where daylight’s reach almost gave way to darkness, I saw a small, separate enclosure inside the aviary, the door could be opened outwards, and behind it were feathers and twigs, not just dust and dirt as you might expect, there in the darkness was what he wanted to show me, there’ll be babies soon, he said, he let me take a peek, at the nest, the down, the tiny eggs, at what was concealed within that shell, alive beneath the delicate surface that would crack open before too long, he replaced the catch on the door, I followed him out, crossing the church floor, I thought to myself, like after a service.

The birds arrived in a box. A wooden box left on our doorstep. The lid was nailed in place, but there were holes in the planks of wood, we could see them. They were completely silent. We had to pry the two nails out and lift the lid. They huddled closer together. Three of them, one male, two females, shades of blue, green. They were disconcerted by their new surroundings to begin with, they stayed in the box, perched by the opening or in the darkness within, concealed between the rotting planks, on the threshold between where they had once been and where they now found themselves, we fetched sunflower seeds, they like those, and millet, and for a time I could think about nothing but the birds, at first I was afraid this would be like everything else, that something would rub off on them, something of the everyday, but the birds shook it off, all that greyness.

A mark on one page of the notebook, I must have spilled something, a blot, accidental embellishment, perhaps something had rubbed off there, a sign that everything is headed for chaos, miasma, I think to myself, I call Ruth, she works in a second-hand bookshop in London, we talk now and then, I wouldn’t call us friends, Ruth is just a voice on the phone, she’s not going to turn up at my door, we talk about a book I’m looking for, how are things down south, Ruth asks, and for a moment I’m poised to tell her about the boy and the plans and the aviary, but I don’t, I start writing again after that, I write until twelve, then I need to look up. Perhaps it’s gradual, that shift inwards, perhaps it’s not on any one specific day that you close the door, but instead you tuck pieces of yourself away bit by bit, like putting away clothes, folding them up, some people seal them inside vacuum-packed bags, the air sucked out of them until the bags are small and flat and take up no space at all. Perhaps it’s like when people are taken by surprise by the weather, when they discover that the roads are blocked by snow, or that the door has been frozen shut and they have to make do with staying where they are, it’s good to take things easy for the odd day or two, people say when that happens, but before long more time has passed than you realised, and the weather hasn’t changed, there’s nothing swift about it in reality, closing that door, it just happens a little more with each passing day, until eventually you realise that the others are permanently on the outside, knocking at the door.

A black-backed gull sailed down onto my grandmother’s balcony, I remember it as bigger than it was, I was younger at the time, it seemed at least as big as the balcony itself, but it was big either way, it must have flown in from the fjord, that’s what the grown-ups said, and it had landed just outside our dinner party, it was a Sunday, it had an enormous wingspan, far too powerful to take off from the floor of the deep balcony, it flapped its wings, struggled, we stood at the window and watched it, my uncle took a particular interest, he’d been out at sea and was fascinated with everything that belonged out there, he was the one whose idea it was to balance the long broom handle between the doorway and the balcony window boxes, we watched him as he opened the door and laid the handle at an angle towards the opposite side, the bird was still as the long piece of wood was wedged in position, then it hopped up and made its way up the handle, paused for a moment’s rest by the window box, then took off, gliding into the air, or flapping upwards, I can’t recall, but we stood and watched it go, me and the grown-ups. Nobody said anything, but Mum later mentioned that she had been thinking about her youngest brother, that they all must have been thinking about him, her other brother, the one who vanished out at sea, the bird was a reminder, his soul had flown in to be with them, had just wanted to be with them for a while, the brother no one mentioned, the one nobody said a word about, the one who could never return, the form he had chosen had been too big, too stubborn and unruly, all they could do was to help him on his way.

It's the same balcony that I remember from when I was nine years old, a balcony a few metres squared in size, with peeling paint and flower boxes, they’d set out stools, there was just enough space for two narrow kitchen chairs pushed together, Grandma used to sit there reading, my mum too, when she visited, she’d smoke out there, and on the threshold between the drawing room and the balcony was a high sill or barrier, it was possible to sit there too, if you were in any doubt that the balcony itself was safe, the low-rises had been built in the fifties and were located on a through road in my hometown on the west coast, but the balcony had a view out over the water, they looked out on a small part of the fjord and the port where they unloaded container ships, the threshold functioned as a sort of warning, it could have been placed there as a reminder that stepping out onto the balcony was something you undertook at your own risk, but I liked to sit there on the broad, high sill, and that’s probably where I was sitting, or possibly on the floor just inside, playing with something or other; when I picture them, it’s from a slight distance. They were talking out there, the two grown-ups, and my mother wasn’t happy, she was very *un*happy, she gave cross responses to whatever she was being asked, and then she said: nobody wants someone with a child in tow like that. I heard what she’d said quite clearly because she was sitting closest to me, I looked up at them, and my grandmother said something intended to lessen the impact of her words, to smooth things over, *you can’t say that, dear*. But she could, of course. Nobody wants someone with a child in tow like that. I knew it, but it was confusing. Because what did she mean by ‘like that’, was she trying to emphasise the *child* part or the *like that* part. Was it fine that I was a child, but not a child *like* *that*, or was it the existence of *something like a child* that was the entire problem, and it was impossible not to picture a specific type of rucksack, the old-fashioned kind with a drawstring you had to pull and thread through fastenings on the top, I knew that she had no choice but to lug this rucksack along with her, we moved around a lot, and it was this child, this rucksack, that was so difficult to rid herself of. She often forgot about it, took it places and failed to recall the fact, passed it on to friends and casually asked if they could keep an eye on it, people expect rucksacks to be useful but this one was simply grey and took up space, and it was impossible to say what might be inside it and if there was any sense in lugging it any further.

Mum, she didn’t like that I was pretentious. She was the only girl in her family, she had three brothers, she was supposed to be feminine, not to talk too much, not to eat too much. She wasn’t supposed to be invisible, but was only ever supposed to be visible in a particular way. She said that I talked too much, a teacher told Mum that I would make my way around the classroom talking to everyone, Mum worried about it in the same way she worried about me being as tall as I was at the age of eight. That’s when I tell people things, she says I tell lies, I tell a supermarket cashier that I have a brother who lives in the attic, that Dad is touring with his theatre group, that Grandma is so short that we’ve built a special house for her. They believe it, the people working at the supermarket where we buy our milk, our bread, they ask Mum why my brother lives in the attic, who built the small house that her mother lives in.

Her father died when I was born, fourteen days beforehand, he had occupied every inch of the flat, he and the piano, any space he hadn’t already taken up himself was filled with the piano, the others lived on the periphery, Mum, her mother, her brothers, he was a gentle giant, he was quick to anger, she says, Mum always remembers him as being nice, I think she’s a little uncertain herself if what she’s saying is the whole truth, he played piano, that was what he did, the piano was his life, it was his work, that was what he was, he’d get up from the table in the middle of a conversation, for instance, and regardless of what anyone else was doing at the time, he’d sit at the piano and start to play, and everyone would fall silent, stop mid-sentence, place their cutlery down, knock back the contents of their glass if they were in the middle of making a toast, there was nothing to be said, they couldn’t carry on if he was sitting on that stool, nobody said a word as he played, nobody moved a muscle, they were frozen until the music stopped, he could take to that stool at any moment, and he played so well, he’d been trained in Dresden and had worked at the conservatory, he sat there and when he had finished playing, they carried on as before. He’d taken the piano whenever they’d moved, transported it with him, the flats they’d lived in had been furnished around the instrument, they’d moved where they moved for its sake, to cities he could play in, their lives built around it, the music, there was a piano within them. Various moves had seen it lifted in through a window, conveyed up a flight of stairs, it had once even been strung up in some sort of rope arrangement, it was to be hoisted up and into a new flat, others in the building must have watched on as it was heaved and hauled and then left hanging between floors, gleaming black, it’s easy to imagine it continuing its voyage upwards, over the treetops, up into the sky, fourteen days before I was born it all came to an end, the music, the piano. They returned to the flat alone, Mum, her mother, her brothers. They waited for him to come inside and sit down, they sat there, in the chairs facing the piano, and then, only one another. The piano became an item of furniture, a strange transformation, crushed, Mum said, everything had been crushed, shattered into pieces, but the piano remained. Until that, too, started to disappear, it became a coffin, a case, an item of furniture to be sold on. None of them knew what to say, what to do. Then I came along. She told me I was the only thing that gave life a sense of meaning back then.

That was how she’d said it, she must have been glad to have me, then, before. Before. That time, before, when I was young and she was married, when the sixties were new, shiny, even after the divorce, even then. Before everything that came after.

I had finches as a child, zebra finches of the *Taeniopygia* genus, Dad had owned a parrot before I was born, I’d heard that it would fly back and forth in the drawing room in Dad’s family home whenever it was let out of its cage, it seems unlikely, a great big bird let loose in rooms I remember being so clean, so neat, so quiet, the idea that there might have been a bird there, with all the racket and ruckus they bring, it’s always hard to pin down whether it was blue or grey or green, people have such different memories of it, sometimes it can talk, other versions of the story claim that it can only sing, it sits in its cage and waits for the fleeting hour when it’ll be allowed out, or it has its own spot in the drawing room where it occasionally spreads its wings and takes off, flying around the room, over the heads of guests, but that can’t be true, a parrot flying around like that, there’s something unpredictable about the whole thing that I don’t associate with that family, I even think, in some conversations, that it’s reduced to being a budgie. Regardless, that was all long before I was born. I get the finches a few years after the conversation on Grandma’s veranda. I move out of Grandma’s flat and to the suburbs, to Mum’s flat, where I’m to stay, where we’re to live together. The zebra finches that nobody is particularly interested in, a sheet of gravel paper is pushed inside via a little drawer that forms the base of the cage, the small plastic vessels are filled with food and water, a seed bell dangles beside a mirror in a plastic frame and a little bell, as if people imagine the birds might actually want to see themselves inside that tiny cage, in that depressing nook, and they seem to know that they’re not exactly loved because it doesn’t take long for them to start attacking one another.

Once, after he’s been drinking, after he’s consumed every drop in the house and rummaged through the cellar and the boot of the car on the hunt for more, Sirke tells me that I’m right, I’m right after all, because my mother, in particular, takes up more space than the birds do, I tell him that’s not the case, that he can’t say that, I seldom talk to my mother, we almost never see her, Sirke is on the verge of nodding off, but still he carries on talking, on and on, telling me that’s why she lives her too, look in every corner, he says, anything that begins to spread starts there, that nasal tone of voice when he’s been drinking, I hear it more and more frequently these days, have you checked the corners, Sirke says, drunk, in some corner or other not too far away, that’s where I think you’ll find Mum.

Sirke is at home here, always has been, it’s me the people in the village call the immigrant, the Scandinavian, I’m the one who’s foreign. There are things you can’t take with you when you emigrate, things you have to have, yet which have to stay behind, I thought about that when we came here, what I’d chosen to bring with me, which wasn’t as obvious as I’d first believed it would be, it had been impossible to imagine that there was much that would have to be left behind before I set out, that shirt, this dinner set, things from when the children were young, jewellery, books, we had to give it all away, it was impossible, yet still we had to do it, and yet the reverse is also true: if I stay in one place for an extended period of time, I end up with more of what I don’t want, I try to throw things out, to tuck them away somewhere, but something always makes its way back to me. I donated an entire box to a flea market, ugly candlesticks, cups, frames, ornaments. My youngest daughter came home with the whole lot stashed inside a plastic bag, look what I’ve found, look at this, did she remember them, did she know as soon as she laid eyes on it all that everything just had to be ours, did she want us to take it with us, was she concerned even then about what might disappear.

The cat thinks it lives here, a black and greyish cat that belongs to nobody, I’ve tried getting rid of it on many occasions, closing the door, shooing it away, the cat always returns. Perhaps it’s the birds, it likes to peer up at the cage, patiently waiting, following their every move, tracing the arc as one of them swoops over to a new perch, never trying to get inside, never sticking a paw anywhere near the bars. But it is captivated by the apprentice. I pass the open door and see him leaning down and picking up the long-handled paint roller, lifting it high up the wall, rolling it downwards, lifting it back up again, he’s wearing a black shirt with white text and a shabby-looking pair of jogging bottoms, the cable of his headphones dangles from each ear, I bend down and pick up the cat, which is sitting in the doorway, then gaze at the painter, let it out the back door into the garden, the cat turns around to look at me, opens its mouth in protest.

In Westminster, at The National Gallery, there is a painting by Thomas Gainsborough called *The Painter's Daughters with a Cat*, a portrait of two girls around eight and ten years old, and no cat. The animal’s absence is well-known, the cat was never painted. Nevertheless, the cat is there, in the form of an outline that isn’t immediately obvious. You have to step closer, lean in, or at the very least look very carefully in order to detect its contours. Only then can you see the cat to the left of the girls, its mouth open, hissing because the eldest daughter, Margaret, is tugging on its tail. They’re so beautiful, the girls, redheads with big eyes, pale skin, unruly expressions, they’re bored. He wasn’t known for his symbolism, Gainsborough. But here’s Mary and Margaret and the incomplete outline of something more. Does it disappear, the cat, does it fade away, or does it gradually become visible, it’s hard to say. The photographs I have of my daughters, marching barefoot through the front door of the house we lived in when they were young, holding a length of pink silk above their heads like a canopy, the youngest first, the eldest behind her, one afternoon in the summertime, you can just about see the neighbour’s black cat at the edge of the picture. Daughters. They were older when we moved here, much older than in that photo.

I work in the room I chose the very first time we viewed the house, it’s a room for writing in, the priest who lived here before us would write his sermons at the desk by the window. From there I can look out and down at the front of the house, the small yard, the woodland. It was autumn when we moved to the area, that was before we found this property, we came to the house in the late summer, the garden pond, the green layer of moss on the wooden fence. We had spotted the old trees as we’d been driving past one day. Yew Tree Cottage, the small sign at the front of the house read. At first we made our way round cautiously, opened doors, held our breath, anxious that something would slip away, or that we’d fail to spot it if we moved too fast, and eventually we ended up in the drawing room, looking out at the surrounding land, the trees in the back garden, the thicket and the hedge. We exhaled, I could hear Sirke, and I’m sure he heard me too, we exhaled in unison, we’d hung something up here, set something down. We knew we’d be staying, we were already living in the old rooms, there were traces of us wherever we went, fragments of other moments in time: him, running up the stairs, newspaper in hand, me, seated at the writing desk or planting something in the garden, the sound of the girls, our daughters, in the kitchen.

Daughters when they’re young, there’s something soft and hard about them all at once, their willpower is a wire, a cord at the heart of all that featherlight material, tangled hair like white candy floss, daughters on the rocks, smooth coastal rocks you find around the cabins you spend your holidays in, they crouch down in the sand to pee, hunt behind the sofa or out in the garden for hidden eggs, yellow and pink and purple Easter eggs, split, open, secret, like daughters themselves. I thought about the fact that everything inside them was ready from the very day they were born, anatomical insurance, new daughters. Daughter inside daughters. A black-and-white photograph, not of them, but of me, three or four years old, by Mum’s side, we’re sitting so close together, so near to one another, she’s reading something to me, reading, but she’s holding the book with the inside facing out so that we can all see it, her and me and the photographer, we’re sitting in the flat on Roald Amundsens vei in Bergen, on the sofa that my father made himself, he’s also the one who took the photograph, she often reads to me, I read the same book to my daughters, I think I get mixed up sometimes, that what I remember is me reading, not her reading to me, but in this picture it’s Mum who’s reading, the story of Woody, Hazel and Little Pip, they live in the tree with the acorns, her tone is solemn, as if she were on the radio or reading for a large audience rather than just for me, she wants to get it right, as if there’s always a wrong way and a right way to go about things.